

*Blake and Lana*



HEATHER TULLIS

First Kiss—Blake and Lana

© 2018 Heather Justesen

This is a work of fiction. The characters, names, places, incidents and dialogue are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form whatsoever without prior written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief passages embodied in critical reviews and articles.

Published by Jelly Bean Press, PO Box 548 Osawatomie, KS 66064

Cover design © 2018 by Heather Justesen

# Chapter One

## Chapter One

Blake Bahlmann emerged from George DiCarlo's office after an eternity-long afternoon meeting. He found the inner workings of setting up a new hotel fascinating, but since he had just become manager of the DiCarlo Hotel—Chicago, it wasn't like would be very involved with the new one being built in Colorado.

As he told the administrative assistant good night, he entered his office. He needed half an hour to finish up his notes from the meeting and make a to-do list for the next day before he took a dinner break.

George's excitement about the new hotel was catchy, and for the first time, Blake understood his own father's love of opening a new hotel. Not that he could discuss that with his father—who worked for a rival chain and was not happy about his son's choice of employer. It didn't seem to matter who Blake worked for, though, since his father was never pleased by Blake's accomplishments.

Through the open door he heard Lantana DiCarlo—George's second daughter, and head of guest services—stop to speak to the administrative assistant. She laughed at something the other woman said, her soft tones ringing through the air and making him lift his gaze to look at her. Getting to see her everyday was definitely one of the perks of the move to Chicago.

Lana DiCarlo was younger than himself by at least eight years, but she was good at her job—one of the best he'd ever worked with—and so beautiful, every other woman seemed to pale in comparison. The more time he spent with her—at work only, of course—the more he liked her.

He loved the way her dark auburn hair curved around her shoulders, the easy way she had with customers, the kindness she showed to everyone she worked with. She was well liked by all the staff, and a couple days earlier he'd seen her calm an irate guest in only a few minutes without a hitch. Yet her kindness didn't lead people to take advantage of her—as far as he could tell, everyone in her department worked hard to please her. She would make a fantastic hotel manager someday.

It really sucked that she was his boss's daughter, and his own employee—which made anything beyond a business relationship a Very Bad Idea, no matter how tempting.

Blake tore his gaze away before anyone could catch him staring and finished scribbling thoughts from the meeting with George. He needed to focus on work right now.

"Hey, Mr. Bahlmann, do you have a minute?" Lana asked from his doorway.

"Yes." *For her? Always.* "Please, take a seat." He gestured to the leather chair across the desk from him. "And *please* call me Blake when we're alone. No need for formalities."

She smiled at his request. "Okay, then, Blake. I just wanted to brief you on a situation we had earlier. We wrote it in the book, but I thought you deserved a warning before our department heads meeting tomorrow."

"Sounds serious." He set down his pen on the desk and gave her his full attention.

While they spoke, he couldn't help enjoying the way she gestured with her hands and the serious look in her brown eyes. They talked though the situation involving an unhappy guest who had checked out early and discussed options for avoiding the problem in the future.

She had thought it through and handled it appropriately—not that he had doubted she would, but he was glad to know more about it in case it escalated to a lawsuit.

Blake set down the Namiki fountain pen with its inlaid shells that his grandfather had given him when he graduated from college. “You keep it up and you're going to be a hotel manager before you know it—and all of my headaches will become yours.” He gestured to the stack of files on his left. “Whether that is a blessing or curse depends on the hour.”

Animation shone on her face, and she leaned forward. “You have no idea how much I want that—how much I've always wanted that, even if it does come with a pile of extra work. I have lots of ideas that I'd like to try in the hotel.” She paused and pushed strands of hair behind the perfect shell of her left ear. “You know, when it's my turn to be in charge. Someday. Dad mentioned once that maybe Juniper Ridge will be my chance. I keep telling myself that I'm probably not ready yet, not wanting to get my hopes up too much before he makes it final, but I'm ready. I know I am.”

He had to agree, and he'd be sure to mention it to her father soon. “It's going to be a great facility. Have you heard the latest updates on the work?”

“Not yet. My schedule never seems to meld with Dad's lately. And he's headed off tonight to LA to check on the hotel there, so it could be a few days.”

“I just came from a meeting about the Juniper Ridge hotel. Maybe we could talk about what's going on over dinner.” As soon as Blake said it, he questioned the wisdom of dinner alone with her, but told himself there wasn't any harm in a work conversation over a meal. He often used meals to facilitate meetings, and this was no different. Right?

He was excellent at justifying things he wanted to do.

If Lana felt any hesitation, she covered it so fast that it wasn't distinguishable. “I'd like that. When were you thinking?”

“Well, I have to eat tonight. You?” He did his best to turn on the Southern charm his mother had drilled into him.

A smile broke on her face, and he swore his heart rate kicked up a notch.

“I do need to eat too. How convenient. I have a few things I need to handle downstairs before I take off. When did you want to go?”

He met her in the hall outside his office half an hour later, as he headed down to her office. “I thought we could try out an Italian place a few blocks away,” he suggested after greeting her. “Your father recommended it a few days ago.” They pushed out into the chilly fall air.

“Must be Mario's.” She buried her neck deeper into the collar of her jacket.

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“It's one of our favorite places. Their pesto is amazing, and the marinara is enough to make you cry, it's so good. That's not even talking about the pizza or desserts.”

He grinned. “So, you interested?”

“Absolutely.”



Lana listened to Blake's Southern drawl, enjoyed tossing ideas back and forth with him, and participated in his earnest discussion about the new hotel in Juniper Ridge. She had worked her tail off to become a hotel manager and was working twice as hard to learn every angle to the business possible right now. Since she was twelve, it had been her dream to be the youngest manager in the DiCarlo chain and her dad let her start cleaning rooms in the Chicago hotel. She had worked in every department since then, becoming familiar with the daily routine for every member of staff, including their department's struggles and challenges. She added four years in college earning a degree in hotel management while continuing to work the service desk. There was nothing she had ever wanted more.

Watching Blake's lips curve as he smiled and appreciating the way his shirt molded perfectly to his frame made her realize the job may be the thing she wanted most, but it wasn't the only thing she was interested in.

It was great sharing her first interest with this man, having a stimulating meeting of the minds with someone so handsome and charming. The fact that he had experience to impart, and loved his job as much as she did, just made their connection that much stronger.

At the moment it was just friendship between them, possibly only mentorship, but as the dialogue shifted from their work to politics, to Broadway theater, she could hardly focus on her dinner. She'd felt a zip of something between them the first time they met more than a year earlier, and she had thought it was mutual. Now that they were working at the same hotel, she hoped she had been right.

"Is it hard being so far away from home?" she asked when the conversation shifted to family. She had met his parents once at a hotelier's conference—they had come across as glittering social animals, the kind who were always looking to see if there was someone more interesting or higher up the ladder to talk to than whomever they happened to be with at the time. She had wondered more than once how Blake had turned out so different.

Blake never looked around at whoever else was nearby but seemed to forget anyone else existed when he spoke to her—and she'd noticed a similar concentrated attention when he spoke with others at the hotel. It was a rare trait, and one she tried to emulate with her department.

A long moment lapsed before he answered her question about being so far from home, as if he had only been weighing his response. The hum of other people's voices seemed to rush into the gap, only to back away again when he spoke. "Not really. I've always wanted to travel and live in different places—you can't really learn that much about a place you've only visited. Besides, I'm not as close to my family as you are to yours. My brother and I have never gotten along all that well and I'm kind of a disappointment to my parents."

*Seriously?* "Your father is in the hotel business, and you've risen through the ranks quickly—becoming manager of a hotel the size of DiCarlo Chicago isn't anything to sneeze at, especially in your early thirties. Dad's teaching you about opening new hotels, so he must be impressed—he

usually reserves the fun only for himself.” She was actually a little jealous that Blake was getting so involved in the building process but reminded herself to take it one step at a time.

“But I’m not working for the same company as my father, and I haven’t studied at his feet the way you have with yours.”

“I haven’t always.” Lana picked up her soda and drained the end of it. “I took a side trip for a while and tested the waters in a different company. It was good to get a different perspective and make new contacts outside of our chain.” That hadn’t been her main reason for leaving the fold, but this was not the time to talk about her family secrets or her personal disillusionment.

“Some parents are less willing to forgive that kind of stepping away. You’re lucky your father understood.”

He had understood all right—she had made sure he knew exactly why she had left the company at the time. Things had been strained between them for a long time after that, but they had worked things out eventually. Though she loved her time working for the other company, she was happy to be back in the hotel where she had practically grown up.

The waitress brought over fresh drinks for them, and Blake ordered a serving of tiramisu and one of cannoli.

He looked over at her before the waitress left. “Do you mind sharing with me? I can’t eat two alone, but I couldn’t decide between them,” he said to Lana.

“I’m game. They’re both amazing.” Normally it irked her when a guy ordered for her, but she didn’t feel like he was trying to assert his control.

Their gazes meshed and Lana felt a shiver of something pass between them. It wasn’t the first time she had felt something similar that night, but that didn’t lessen the impact. Blake asked her something, but her mind turned sluggish. and it took a few extra seconds to process his question about her favorite places to eat in the city.

“Oh, yeah, there’s this little German café on Foster Avenue with the most amazing strudel—seriously, I could live on that stuff. Then there’s the Peruvian place near my apartment. And this tiny hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant near the symphony hall.” She paused and looked at him seriously. “I’ve made a study of the best places to eat. I could keep you happily eating at a different restaurant every day for two months without running out of new options.” It was part of the reason that she forced herself to work out most mornings—otherwise she’d be a blimp by now.

He grinned. “Maybe you’ll need to make me a full list sometime.”

“I could do that.” But she would rather show him herself. It would be a great excuse to spend more time with him one on one.

Their desserts arrived and they lingered over the confections, and then the empty plates, for more than an hour before Lana decided she should head home. She had some planning to do for the next day before bed and an early alarm for her daily torture session with her weight machine and tread mill—especially necessary after the dinner she had just enjoyed.

“I guess we should be going.” Blake looked at his watch with regret.

“They might kick us out soon if we don’t leave on our own.”

He had taken care of the bill earlier, so he extended a hand now and helped her stand from her seat, the old-fashioned gesture gaining even more charm because it was coming from him. He kept her hand in his as they strolled out of the restaurant and into the chilly fall air.

“You have a lot of great ideas and excitement,” he said. “I love watching you work. You’re going to be an amazing hotel manager someday.”

Lana smiled, pleased and a little embarrassed by the praise at the same time. “Thanks. I’ve been watching the best.” Their gazes met and she felt that quiver in her chest again. She had never felt this connected to someone so fast before.

They came to a stop beside her car, and she turned toward him. “Thanks for the invitation. Dinner was great.” She looked up at him, studying his expression, willing him to lean in for the kiss she wanted so much.

“I’m happy to oblige.” He looked down at her, studying her face. “I’m glad to finally have a chance to have a real conversation with you that wasn’t focused on work the whole time. It’s been a crazy couple of weeks since I got here.” He continued to hold her hand, lingering as the connection between them continued to grow.

“It has. I know Dad was happy to have you come on board though. I think he’s taken on more than he could chew this time.” Had she moved closer to him, or had it been him who had narrowed the distance? Her breath hitched in curiosity and anticipation.

“Looks to me like he’s got a good grasp. It’s interesting work, though.”

“Yeah.”

They now stood with only a few inches between them, Lana staring up into his eyes, her lips already tingling with anticipation. Surely this was leading to a kiss, wasn’t it?

He seemed to sway slightly in her direction, but instead of closing the gap between their mouths, he straightened and then stepped back.

Disappointment shot through her.

He didn’t meet her gaze as he broke the silence. “Anyway, I should let you go. See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Tomorrow.” She fumbled her keys as she pulled them from her pocket and nearly dropped them. Thankfully, she managed to get into the car without making a total fool of herself. Unless you counted the fact that she had nearly thrown herself at him.

Blake lifted a hand in a wave when she glanced back at him before she pulled into traffic. When she glanced in her rearview mirror, he sauntered off, his hand in his pockets. Oh man, she was a goner.

# Chapter Two

## Chapter Two

Blake knew dinner had been a mistake long before he walked her to her car. He liked her too much and spending well over two hours talking to her about anything and everything had only underscored that. He had half hoped that their shared meal would prove to him that they weren't suited at all, but he hadn't been so lucky.

She was practically perfect—and he was in *so much trouble*.

Though he'd been interested before, Blake had never dated anyone he worked with—as his father frequently reminded him, it was unprofessional and led to all kinds of messiness.

But when his lunch appointment with George got cancelled the next week, leaving him staring at an equally surprised Lana, who had been slated to join them, he had automatically asked her if she still wanted to eat together.

"You don't have to, if you'd rather not," she demurred.

"Nonsense," George had interjected as he slid into his coat. "I'm sure Blake can fill you in on the updates in Juniper Ridge instead of me. Go down to the restaurant and put it on my tab." He hurried out the door on the way to his emergency appointment—though he had never specified who it was with.

Lana looked at Blake. "I guess I can't fault his logic."

"And a free lunch is a free lunch," he agreed. He should have been better at finding an excuse. Despite the full week since their last meal together, he hadn't been able to dissuade himself from being interested in her. He had, instead, come to admire her even more as he got to know her in bits and snatches on the job. Lunch was probably a bad, bad idea.

Which his boss had endorsed—insisted on, actually, so he could hardly demure.

And what was he, anyway, some animal who couldn't control himself in a public place?

They each shared their vision of the new hotel over club sandwiches and cheesecake, and Blake heard himself asking her to the movie he planned to see that night.

"I've been meaning to go but finding time away from here and someone to go with can be a challenge," she admitted.

"It starts at six-thirty. We could see it and then grab a late dinner."

She smiled. "Sounds good. It's been ages since I've been to a movie."



Lana spent the rest of the day telling herself she wasn't being very smart but was still unable to help it. Every minute she spent with Blake made her want to spend more with him. Besides, she really did want to see the new Sandra Bullock flick.

"You mentioned a German place last week. You up for it?" Blake asked as they met in the hall on the way out to the parking lot that evening.

“Always.”

“You want to ride with me? It seems silly to drive over there separately when we’re going to the same place.”

“Sure. Of course.” She couldn’t be happier about that.



It was funny how a simple date like going to a movie and grabbing dinner afterward was so much more enjoyable when you were with the right person. Blake loved every minute of his time with Lana. He loved watching the smile brighten up her face until her eyes joined suit. He loved the way she pushed her hair back behind her ear, exposing the delicate shell of skin. He loved the way she was able to debate the plausibility of the storyline with him. He was starting to think it was just her, maybe he was starting to love *her*.

He knew it wasn’t a good idea, but he just couldn’t help himself. Oh, he tried not to be enchanted with her soft skin and the sound of her laugh, but it didn’t seem to matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t convince himself.

She sat across from him with half a plate of schnitzel left but looking at the desserts menu anyway. "Like I said, the strudel can’t be beat, but the bread pudding is a pretty close second."

Blake grinned. "So how do you ever decide?"

She gave him the look under her eyebrows that said she wasn’t sure if she wanted to admit, but then her lips parted. "I usually don’t decide between them. I usually order both. It may take me a few days to get through all of it, but I enjoy every bite of it."

He laughed. "Well, I think that’s a great idea, let’s do that." The waitress was passing by just then and he flagged her down. "So, we both want strudel and bread pudding. Can you package all of those to go?"

"Do you want your leftovers packaged as well?" she asked, pointing to their half-eaten dinners.

"Yes, please. It was amazing." It was an enormous amount of food is what it was, not that he was complaining. He was a big, big fan of leftovers, since it meant he didn’t have to worry about what he was going to eat the next day.

"No problem, I’ll be right back." She hurried toward the kitchen. Blake looked back across the table at Lana who was shaking her head and smiling. "You are such a bad example for me. You totally just enabled me."

"Hey, look who’s talking. You’re the one who suggested it."

Lana grinned.

Before long they were out on the sidewalk walking through a snowstorm. The wind was nearly gone for a change, and the flakes fell softly on their heads, creating swirling halos of light as they passed under the streetlights.

"It’s been one of those winters," he said. "I can’t wait to get to Vegas for the conference next month."

Lana nodded. "That's always one of my favorite parts of the winter, by the time I've gotten through a few months of Chicago winter, I need that week in Vegas at the conference to soak up some sun and warmth to get me through till spring."

"What do you want to bet that was why they chose Vegas in the first place?"

"Oh, I'm sure it is. I'm surprised Dad let us both sneak out of the hotel at the same time for this conference."

"We both know you're going to be a hotel manager soon, and as your father's daughter, I'm sure he has a lot of other, bigger roles for you not too far down the road. He's also been sharing a lot of the plans for the hotel in Juniper Ridge. He says I'll be going with him as a consult, but I sometimes wonder if it's going to be more than that."

"Well, he does keep saying that he's going to retire one of these days," she said. "Maybe he sees you as the new face of DiCarlo Hotels."

Blake watched her face as she said it, wondering if she felt left out at that thought. It was her family business after all, so he wouldn't blame her if she felt uncomfortable with her dad passing her over to give him this training.

"Is it hard for you? Seeing someone else, even someone as nice, charming, handsome, debonair as me, moving into that role? I wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable with it."

Lana chuckled and shook her head. "No, of course not. I still have to be a hotel manager first, take those baby steps. And I really do want to run a hotel. I'm not sure that I want to be the person who oversees the new buildings. At least not yet. And you'll do a great job."

He reached out and slid his hand into hers, unable to help himself, even though he had been sure only a few hours earlier that this could never happen. But the look in her eyes and the way his own heart was pounding told him that there was more going on here than he had planned. And it definitely wasn't all one-sided.

"I really enjoy spending time with you," he said.

Lana looked pleased, but a little embarrassed. "You're not such a bad conversationalist either. I have a good time with you."

The snowflakes grew large and lacier. Falling like little doilies across her hat, turning the gray sidewalks into a white masterpiece. Traffic was less than usual, thanks to the weather. It was a little fairy-tale-ish.

She stopped under a streetlight and turned to him, the falling flakes landing directly on her nose. She looked up grinning. "I really, really like spending time with you, Blake."

Blake saw the look in her eyes and knew he couldn't hold out any longer. "I really, really like you too, Lana. I keep telling myself that this couldn't work out between us. It's kind of a weird situation, our working together. Your dad being my boss, me being yours. You technically owning the company that I'm working for."

"It is a little odd. But that doesn't mean that it's wrong." She looked him in the eye. "Don't you think there's something here?"

He couldn't help but think there was something there—something more than he'd shared with any woman he had dated recently. "Yeah, I really do." His gaze fixed on her mouth. She was amazing. Her lips called to him every time he saw them, like sirens to a weary sailor.

"Well then, I don't see any reason why we can't give it a chance. After all, I'll probably be going to Juniper Ridge this summer, to open the new hotel, so if it doesn't work out, it's not like we would have to work together forever. "

"Who says it wouldn't work out?" He reeled her in slowly.

She came willingly, sliding her hands around his waist. "No one. No one has ever said this can't work."

He smiled. "Good." He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, drawing her tighter against him, the soft floral scent of her perfume sliding inside him with every breath. Oh yeah. This is what he had been missing.

This might just be his last first kiss.



Blake and Lana have been a joy to write about from the very first. I loved writing their story, but it always felt incomplete without the story of how it all began. It's been fun to go back and show you how it all began, because that colors everything that happened in *Reclaiming His Bride*. I hope you enjoyed this as much as I did. If you enjoyed it, [check out the rest of their story in \*Reclaiming His Bride\*](#).